

EXPRESSING PROHIBITION IN POSITIVE MODE

M. Abdessalami

“DON’T READ THIS DOCUMENT”

Based on the principle that "the forbidden fruit is always the sweetest," all methods of prohibition, however severe, only increase individuals' determination to transgress the rules. In education, it is observed that even the gentlest and most polite formulations of prohibition are often more than ineffective. Prohibition, when imposed rigidly, often makes what is forbidden more desirable, more attractive and more seductive, thus justifying its transgression.

Prohibitions are meant to control an illegal or dangerous situation, but they often seem to be used in the opposite way. They only make the situation worse. What happens if you casually tell someone:

- Don't swim here
- You mustn't swim here
- You can't swim here
- You are not allowed to swim here
- You are not permitted to swim here
- You are prohibited to swim here
- Swimming here is prohibited
- It's forbidden to swim here
- No swimming allowed!

Do you think they would obey the prohibition without protest?

Although these phrases indicate that swimming is prohibited here, perhaps because it's dangerous, they only serve to heighten the desire to swim, even if one doesn't want to. They are exciting expressions, deeply ingrained in human nature. If they were told why swimming is prohibited in this place, their excitement would undoubtedly be less intense, because they would then feel the danger of drowning or being bitten by a shark, for example.

This explains why some educational methods prove ineffective: they rely solely on prohibition without explaining the reasons behind it. Indeed, to formulate a prohibition in a positive way, one must consider that, without knowing the reason, no one will respect the warning or prohibition, and this is especially true for children, who are impatient.

Some parents, when trying to teach their children good manners, go about it the wrong way. They forbid all inappropriate behavior with excessive rigidity. Their prohibitions boil down to "don't do that," which creates a negative dynamic and prevents children from understanding why they shouldn't act that way. Children need to understand before they can accept and obey a prohibition.

Furthermore, by simply telling children, for example, "You are not allowed to leave your shoes by the door," without offering alternatives, parents reinforce their prohibition and make it less effective. If children obey what you have forbidden, what do you think they will do instead? It is important to offer them alternative solutions. It is better to say, "You are not allowed to leave your shoes by the door; put them away in the shoe cabinet." This way, the instructions are clearer and appear more complete.

Because children have little or no life experience, prohibitions paralyze them: they don't understand the why or the how and can't find alternatives, lacking prior experiences to draw upon. This is why negatively worded injunctions are discouraged. It is much more effective to use affirmative sentences, as they allow children to better understand and accept prohibitions more calmly.

If the child is sitting on the floor, which the parents consider inappropriate, avoid giving orders in a negative and rigid tone, such as "Don't sit on the floor," without further explanation. The child is likely to remain standing until you give them more instructions. It is better to say, "Sit on the chair or the sofa." If the child asks why they need to change position, the parents can explain, "If you sit on the floor, you'll get your hands and clothes dirty, or you might catch a virus. Sitting on the chair or the sofa is more comfortable and safer."

A prohibition phrased positively is generally more effective and yields better results. For example, instead of telling a toddler "Don't scribble on the walls," it's better to say "You can draw on the papers on the desk." "Don't walk barefoot" can simply be replaced with "Put your shoes on; the floor is dirty." Similarly, the common advice "Don't eat junk food" can be rephrased as: "Homemade meals are healthier."

In any case, children need to understand the reasons behind things or to be offered alternatives. Because of their young age, their brains are programmed to respond only to clear and precise requests. We now see that children systematically ask "why?" with every formal prohibition. If you ask your child to put away their tablet or smartphone, they will almost certainly ask, "Why?" So be prepared to explain the harmful effects of excessive use of these devices on their eyes, back, and neck. Furthermore, lead by example by putting away your own mobile phone. You can't convince a child of something if you're doing the exact opposite.

Children are not very receptive to requests, orders, advice, and especially vague and abstract prohibitions. They need concrete and tangible examples to willingly follow your suggestions. It is therefore advisable to improve positive instructions by offering them a choice. You can thus move from the reluctant injunction "Don't do that" to the accepted injunction "Do this," and then to the more appreciated "Are you going to do it now or in ten minutes?" Clearly, this last option is more effective. Its first part gives the child the impression of having indirectly accepted the instruction; all that remains is for them to decide when to carry it out: now or in ten minutes.

The positive approach to prohibition involves offering constructive and helpful suggestions, rather than dwelling on the negative aspects that generate misunderstandings, resistance, and conflict. Children, in particular, are naturally prone to rebellion, and any negative prohibition only reinforces their disobedience. They will persist in doing exactly what

they are told not to do. They don't like being contradicted, but they are likely to accept relevant suggestions and alternatives.

Children consider orders, especially prohibitions, phrased negatively as impossible to follow. They immediately forget them. This is why children are often punished for things they've been told repeatedly not to do, yet do anyway: their brains don't understand or retain the prohibition in the form of "don't do it," but only in the form of "do it." We often hear parents say, "How many times have I told you not to disturb me while I'm sleeping?" Because the prohibition is always phrased negatively, parents have to repeat it constantly, since a child's brain doesn't process negatively phrased orders. So, why not try positive forms?!

A prohibition phrased positively is more effective than one phrased negatively. It seems the brain doesn't process negative language correctly. Worse still, it often reacts in the opposite way when asked not to do something. If you tell someone, "Don't think about a dancing giraffe!", their brain will do the exact opposite and think about a dancing giraffe, just like you are right now. Similarly, if you tell a child, "Don't play ball in the house," their brain will tell them to do the opposite, and they will continue playing ball inside. This is why it's advisable to give commands or instructions positively, such as "Go play in the garden": this is what the brain accepts, processes, and remembers.

If you've read this far, the initial warning, "DON'T READ THIS DOCUMENT," proves that this approach has been tried and tested and has yielded good results. It has demonstrated that a negatively worded prohibition is always counterproductive. Ultimately, rather than saying "Don't do this," it's more effective to say "Do this" or "When do you plan to do it?"

